

(8)

OBSERVATIONS

ON

THE EXTENSION

OF

“CONTAGIOUS DISEASES ACT,”

TO CIVIL POPULATIONS.

*[By "Humanitas"]*

Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2016

<https://archive.org/details/b22480298>

SIR,

As an effort is being made in various quarters to promote the extension of the euphoniously designated "Contagious Diseases Act" to the civil population, I trust you will afford me sufficient space to make a few observations on the subject.

The unfortunate women who by this Act are deprived of their civil rights, and treated with no more consideration than *mere animals*, belong to the most helpless and defenceless of God's creatures. Among their higher ranks are many highly accomplished and most amiable women; women whom a series of deplorable accidents, often in a great measure beyond their control, have been reduced to their present most melancholy condition.

As individuals, it is absolutely impossible for them to break through the ring of scorn and infamy that surrounds them. At the first timid halting step, with a view to flight from their appalling doom, "the whole resistless influences of the surrounding world—the good as well as the bad, close around to hunt them back into perdition." They are the unfortunate scapegoats of society that bear our sins, and I contend that they are deserving of the utmost care and kindly consideration at our hands. I would also submit that to subject *any* unfortunate woman *presumably* belonging to this class—degraded though it be, to the constant terrorism of the police; to drag her off guiltless of any crime, and forcibly compel submission to a semi-public and disgusting instrumental inspection (itself involving in a *high degree the risk of contagion!*) is simply an act of brutality unworthy of a British Government.

So long as the Act (framed for the protection of soldiers) however unjust, was confined to the poor wretches squatted without shelter on the wilds of the Curragh, or those who

slept in the drains and ditches in the neighbourhood of our large military encampments, there was perhaps little cause for complaint. As public attention was called to their miserable condition, *they* would perhaps feel little of the shape of exposure, and were at all events provided with hospitals and shelter. But, when we find certain well-meaning, though I believe mistaken, gentlemen who apparently with very small reason, have constituted themselves the representatives of certain towns, petitioning Parliament (like the frogs in the fable), for the imposition of a yoke upon the people, which strikes a fatal blow at the liberty of the subject, it is high time for those Britains who value their birthright of personal freedom, to speak out on the subject, unsavoury though it be.

I object myself to the extension of this Act, because in affording a fancied immunity which is no real protection, it is a direct encouragement to vice, and the consequent spread of disease in a large class of both married and single men, who are at present prevented from launching into a riotous course of dissipation by the fear of contagion alone.

That it is no real protection is I think proved by the fact that, although a similar abominable system has for years been carried out in Paris, and other Continental towns (so harshly indeed, that ladies when walking in the streets scarce dare lift their eyes from the ground, for fear of insult from the police or arrest as prostitutes!) disease still prevails to such an extent, that English students have for years been compelled to resort to the large venereal hospitals of Paris, because they afforded a field for study impossible to obtain in this country. The population of Paris is less than two-thirds that of London, and yet it has been found necessary to maintain provision in that city for more than three times the number of cases than has been hitherto thought sufficient for London. It is well known that the most severe forms of the disease prevail among the higher class of Frenchmen, and to a much greater extent than among our own countrymen. The greatest authority on the disease is a Frenchman, and his practise in this special department probably exceeds that of all the London practitioners together. He has stated, that the weekly system of examinations as at present carried out in France, is a total failure! and that to be of any use they

should be instituted every eight hours, or at least once a day (a manifest impossibility), and be extended to both sexes. This brings me to another point which is I think deserving of animadversion. If the Act is really what it professes to be—for the prevention of contagion, and not for the *persecution of prostitutes*—why are not its provisions applied to male as well as females? It is well known that men about town when partially cured, propagate disease extensively among their female companions; and surely the Act, to be just, should apply here. Fancy, our embryo warriors, lawgivers, and statesmen liable to arrest, hebdomadal inspection, and occasional seclusion! The idea is of course absurd, and yet surely, “what is sauce for the goose should be sauce for the gander”; unless the title of the Act be what in fact it *is*—a mere blind, and simply a sly and covert method of legalising prostitution *at the expense of the ratepayers*, increasing the burdens of our already overtaxed community, and placing the whole of the women of this country in the absolute power of the police. Oh! why is it that

Man to man so oft unjust,  
Is always so to woman!

The morality of an enactment which seeks to smooth the path of the adulterer at the expense of his victim, may fairly be questioned; and as I have already shown I doubt the wisdom of any attempt to shield the debauchee from those pains and penalties, which a wise Providence has evidently intended should act as a check upon indiscriminate intercourse. But if in spite of common sense, religion and morality, the legislature are determined to protect the paramours of these women, for God's sake let us do our spiriting gently! Let us not trample on our fallen sisters, who were certainly not devils *till we ruined them*; or seek to add to the miseries of their position the vile indignity of a weekly, semi-public, police officer or jail, inspection.

There has been sufficient evidence lately, that the police are likely to develop into a considerable nuisance. This Act which will call into existence a hideous crowd of spies in the pay of Government, places a really awful power in the hands of any ignorant ruffian who can earn eighteen shillings a week by parading the streets; and the amount of terrorism,



favouritism, black mail, and cruel oppression that it will give rise to, may be conceived by any one having a slight knowledge of human nature. It has even been proposed to create a special department of police to carry out the object of this Act, and as far as possible to *repress clandestine prostitution*. Fancy, these officials disguised in plain clothes, like swell mobsmen, dodging after some distracted milliner to test her chastity ! Or lying in wait for an enamoured pair, to blast the reputation of the one, and extract hush money from the other ! What a fine opportunity for bawds and brothel keepers to get comparatively innocent girls in their power, by threatened information, is here obtained ! What a convenient bureau for the receipt of anonymous letters from revengeful swains and jealous companions, will thus be established ! What a list of men of all ranks, even the most influential, married and single, who have not the gift of continency, would be preserved in the archives of these spies upon society, whom, God forbid ! that we should ever be called upon to support in this country. In fact, the Act sanctions the greatest violation of the liberty of the subject that has ever been proposed to a British Parliament since the days of Charles the First. It will form the most bitter dreg in the cup of infamy to many a broken-hearted helpless woman ; destroy her last remnant of self-respect ; and by registration affix an inaffacable brand of shame, banish hope, and offer insuperable difficulties in the way of escape and reclamation.

As to the necessity at the present time for any such measure, it is undoubted that the evils of the disease in question have been greatly exaggerated by the venereal speculists, to whom the Act owes its origin ; the fact being that the disease has with the progress of years been getting milder and milder with each succeeding decade, until we are unable to find in the present day anything in the least analogous to the description given by our forefathers. A vast number of diseases said to be due to inherited syphilis are thus stated without the slightest proof that the parent or ancestors ever had the syphilis, and are just as likely to be due to anything else, or quite independent of that disease. Medicine abounds in false facts, and give a man a bias he will prove anything by statistics. It is no doubt by such statistics

that many well-meaning laymen and members of another and holier profession, have been induced to lend their support to a measure which, could its object be attained, would sap the moral strength and power of the community; and, as Mr. Solly, one of the Council of the College of Surgeons, has observed, "cause fornication to ride rampant through the land."

The effect of these instrumental perquisitions upon the women themselves, is simply to debase them beyond expression. Some years ago, I was present with several others, at the examination of a girl at the "Hospital L'Oursine" in Paris. On being compelled to submit to the disgusting ordeal, the poor creature fell into strong convulsions from a very agony of shame, and was carried out in a fit. The doctor coolly remarked, "that it was not unusual for the women at first to exhibit strong emotion, but they soon ceased to care a sou about any amount of shameful exposure; in fact they soon cease to care about anything!" The beastly photographs that may be purchased at seemingly respectable shops in the French metropolis of the lady proprietors, themselves the subject of the picture, in a state of nudity, may be taken as sufficient evidence of the moral effect of a system which certain beneficed clergymen are lending their aid to introduce into this country.

I may mention also, that the degradation of a subjection to the police, causes the women to regard the *sergents-de-ville* as their sworn foes. There is nothing they will not do to thwart and evade them. To effect this object they seek the aid of and consort with thieves and ruffians of every grade, and speedily become infinitely more degraded, criminal, and dangerous to society than any similar class of women in this country.

As to the utility of the examinations themselves, although the inspection is so disgusting, and involve an operation, it is impossible to say where contagion begins and where it ends; to distinguish a slight abrasion from a venereal sore, or mild affections, to which all women are more or less subject, from certain stages of the other form of the disease in question.

As to the favourable results said to have been obtained in the neighbourhood of our military encampments by the Act of 1866, allow me to call your attention to the fact that, such favourable statistics have been prepared by gentlemen banded together into an association, to force this obnoxious measure upon the civil population. Moreover, that in our military encampments the *men*, as well as the women, have been examined, secluded, and prevented from spreading disease ; and further, that at least one-third of the women have been hunted away from the districts in question by the police, so that soldiers have been *proh pudor!!* confined to intercourse with women, if I may use the expression *warranted* free from disease by Government! Now, it is simply ridiculous to suppose, that because a few men per 1,000 less in these encampments have been affected in consequence of the Act of 1866, that anything like similar results would follow in civil life, where a vast number of women would evade the Act, the men being entirely free to spread the infection, and the police—however brutal and unfeeling, utterly incapable to do more than drive the poor wretches from one district to another.

England has hitherto been considered a free country. “We have sent one King to Phalaris, another to Versailles” in defence of our liberty. Let this Act come into force among the civil population, and that same liberty our boasted birth-right of personal freedom, will be grovelling at the mercy of any ruffian who may become a policeman, or join the band of mercenary spies employed by that precious special department to which I have alluded.

I am, Sir,

Your obedient Servant.

HUMANITAS.